

DEMOCRACY, RULE OF LAW, AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

VIII.

USAID/Lithuania has made a significant difference in the activities and effectiveness of Non-Governmental organizations. USAID projects and officers helped solve important issues and initiated processes of cooperative debate.



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It is with the greatest pleasure and pride that USBF Lithuania refers to its 3 years of cooperation with the supportive and professional USAID team in implementing the Democracy Network Program in Lithuania. The remarkable success of this Program and the good work that the participants continue to do are evidence that USAID successfully nurtured the awaking democracy in the country and provided Lithuanian NGOs with key resources and consultations.

Since 1990, Lithuania has developed into a full-fledged parliamentary democracy. The unicameral Parliament and President are elected directly by the people, and Lithuania has established a solid pattern of free and fair elections. The Constitution, which was overwhelmingly approved by a popular referendum in 1992, establishes the separation of powers, rule of law, and guarantees fundamental human rights. It is backed by a respected Constitutional Court, whose decisions are binding. The judiciary has been reformed to create appellate jurisdiction and increase the number and professional qualifications of judges. Judges have a fair degree of independence in their work, even though lower courts fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice. The press and electronic media are free and lively, and consistently rank among the most trusted institutions in the country. Human rights are respected, as exemplified by the granting of citizenship to all residents of the country, including non-Lithuanian minorities. As a result of these achievements, Lithuania is continuing to be a welcome and active member of a wide variety of European, transatlantic, and international institutions.

Independence has also led to increasing civic activism in all areas of political, economic, and social life. Several thousand non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an increasingly prominent role in strengthening civil society. They improve the lives of citizens through social programs, create opportunities for fruitful mutual association, and engage in advocacy before governmental institutions. The legal framework for NGOs is slowly improving, and a new generation of activists is learning the necessary management and public relations skills. While legal, financial, and organizational challenges remain, by any measure the level of progress since the Soviet period is impressive.

USAID has been a key supporter of many of these democratic processes. Shortly after independence, USAID began work in the most crucial areas, providing technical assistance in the drafting of the new Lithuanian Constitution, supporting the newly formed Parliament, and strengthening the administrations of several Ministries. Strengthening the rule of law (i.e., legal system, judiciary, and legal profession) was a major priority as early as 1993. In the mid-nineties, systematic efforts to improve public administration, particularly at the local level, and support the development of modern and professional political parties commenced.

After 1996, USAID focused on activities to stabilize democracy and market orientation, through increased and better-informed citizen participation in political and economic decision-making processes. The main activity was fostering NGO development, through the CEE Regional Democracy Network Program, and more recently, through a 10-year endowment, the Baltic American Partnership Fund. These activities were to help: 1) create a clearer and more supportive legal and regulatory environment for NGOs; 2) generate a critical mass of active, well-managed NGOs; 3) increase philanthropy, NGO membership, and volunteer activity; 4) augment public support for NGOs; and 5) increase and professionalize public advocacy on the part of leading NGOs.

USAID and its implementing partners developed a network of local counterparts devoted to building and strengthening Lithuania's new democratic institutions. Technical assistance, seminars, training events, study visits, networking activities, information dissemination, demonstration projects, and other modalities have been employed. It is important to note that under Soviet rule, there was little democratic infrastructure, hence, many institutions had to be built from scratch, and individuals to guide them had to be identified, trained and prepared for new leadership roles.

USAID support for democratization and the development of civil society in Lithuania has included the following projects:

- **Rule of Law:** From 1993 to 1999, the American Bar Association-Central and East European Law Initiative promoted legal reform and helped Lithuania's new democratic institutions develop. Emphasis was placed on the judiciary, the legal profession, and the legal education system. Assistance with draft legislation was also provided. Under a joint program of the Department of Justice and the Central and East European Law Initiative, work has continued on reform of the criminal laws and the criminal justice system. During the mid-1990's, numerous legal reform initiatives and training programs were carried out by the Federal Trade Commission (competition and antitrust law), the Department of Commerce-Commercial Law Development Program (trade/export laws and World Trade Organization accession), and the International Development Law Institute (commercial transactions). These efforts have strengthened the legal system and enhanced the qualifications of legal professionals.
- **Governance/Public Administration Reform:** From 1995 to 1998, the National Democratic Institute and Development Associates worked to increase the efficiency, transparency, and openness of local governments. A major goal was improving communications between the authorities and citizens, and opening the way for greater citizen participation, in large measure through civic organizations and NGOs. Locally placed advisors provided technical assistance, set up interactive seminars/events, distributed information, and built channels of communication in a series of pilot municipalities. As a result, citizens now play a more active and direct role in municipal governance.
- **Political Party Reform:** From 1994 to 1997, the International Republican Institute helped Lithuania's political parties become more professional, issue-oriented, and responsive to their constituencies. The Institute provided informational resources, consultations, and an extensive series of practical training sessions that were held throughout Lithuania. This assistance helped to modernize the organizational structures and operational procedures of the political parties, and changed their relationships with each other and the electorate. The Institute made a direct and widely acknowledged contribution to Lithuania's impressive record of consecutive free and fair elections leading to the peaceful transfer of power. No other donor provided such assistance.
- **Civil Society Development:** From 1995-1998, under the Democracy Network Program (DemNet), the U.S. Baltic Foundation provided information, training, consultations, technical assistance, and institutional support to a wide range of Lithuanian NGOs. Following an assessment in 1997, Phase 2 of the program focused on improving the advocacy skills of ten prominent NGOs, each of which selected a major public policy objective. Total assistance amounted to \$2.6 Million. The US Baltic Foundation also received funding for the institutional development of its in-country offices in all three Baltic States. Under the regional component of the Democracy Network, Freedom House/National Forum Foundation continues to facilitate NGO networking, volunteer placements, information sharing, and international linkages for Lithuania from its office in Budapest. As a result, NGOs are more professionally managed, more engaged in policy development and advocacy, and better able to serve their constituents.

- The NGO Fair – an exiting and innovative way to spread the news about NGOs and their work
- The USAID-supported Judicial Training Center offers the only specialized legal education for judges in Lithuania.
- USAID project officer discussing Democracy sector reform with Member of Parliament Vilija Aleknaite Abramikienė



We highly appreciate USAID's contribution to the development of social policy in Lithuania. The Social Innovation Fund would like to specifically mention the support of USAID in organizing the conference "Women and Unemployment in Lithuania" as well as all the help and assistance that the Fund has received during the years of cooperation.



Liuda Mecajeva
Director of Social
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Asta Buikute
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In 1998, USAID provided funds for a new computer class at the Lithuanian Judicial Training Center. Its affiliate in Moletai established a modern classroom that can accommodate up to ten students. USAID assistance enabled Lithuanian judges and court personnel to acquire computer skills that are essential in their daily work.

- **NGO Legal Reform:** Since 1995, USAID has worked to improve the enabling environment for NGOs, especially the legal framework that governs their activities. Much of this work was carried out by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, under the regional component of the Democracy Network Program. Comments and recommendations were provided on draft laws, information on best practices was supplied, training events were held, and a clinical program offering free legal advice to NGOs was established.

- **Democracy Commission:** Since 1994, USAID has funded the Democracy Commission in Lithuania. In cooperation with the U.S. Ambassador and Embassy, and the United States Information Service, the Commission has awarded small grants to a wide range of NGOs involved in human rights, civic education, NGO development, and independent journalism/media. To date, \$500,000 has been provided to 79 NGOs.

- **Judicial Reform:** Since it was founded in 1996, the Lithuanian Judicial Training Center has been supported by USAID through the American Bar Association - Central and East European Law Initiative. The Center, which is an NGO, offers the only organized continuing legal education for new and sitting judges in Lithuania. In 1998, USAID provided funds for computers and the establishment of a computer-training center/program for judges. This has helped judges develop crucial skills for the information age.

- **Program on Open Legislative Process:** This was a major initiative during the fall of 1998, carried out by USAID and its training provider, World Learning. A plenary session at the Parliament covered the benefits of and procedures for open hearings, and technical assistance facilitated an actual open Committee hearing on draft revisions to the Law on Charity and Sponsorship for NGOs. Experts and NGO leaders testified in front of live cameras and one hundred officials and spectators. Afterwards, the Parliamentary Statutes were amended to include provisions on open hearings. Participatory events where NGO representatives and independent experts comment on proposed legislation now occur on a regular basis.

- **NGO-Coalition Building Project:** In 1999, USAID funded a grant to the NGO Information and Support Center in Vilnius to build a national coalition that is now working to improve the legal and general climate for philanthropy. Increasing the number of sectoral initiatives like coalitions is an important component of the USAID strategy, and improved philanthropy is crucial for the future sustainable development of the entire NGO sector in Lithuania. In 1998, USAID sponsored the only public opinion survey on NGOs, and an analysis of prominent Lithuanian NGOs, carried out by the NGO Center and the Social Information Center. This generated crucial information that has been widely used.

- **HIV/AIDS Prevention Project:** Also in 1999, USAID funded a grant to the NGO Information Center in Klaipeda to create a network of NGOs that is providing information and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS in this particularly vulnerable part of the country. This is being accomplished via education, media campaigns, outreach to youth, minimizing drug abuse, etc. USAID has also supported several international events on this subject, and is undertaking a regional project on HIV/AIDS prevention.

- **Support for NGOs in Visaginas:** Visaginas is a community whose economy is totally based on operation of the nearby Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. In 1998-99, USAID undertook a series of consultations, held a donor roundtable, and supported two training events, to initiate assistance to NGOs in this strategically located Russian-speaking town. The Democracy Commission provided a grant to the Coordinating Council of NGO leaders to set up an NGO support facility, which is helping integrate Visaginas NGOs into the fabric of Lithuanian civil society.

- **Baltic American Partnership Fund:** The Fund began work in 1999, and is USAID's main democracy legacy program in Lithuania. It is a non-profit New York State public charity in the form of a sinking endowment. It is expected to last ten years, with an endowment of \$15 million, provided equally by USAID and the Open Society Institute/three Baltic National Open Society Foundations (Soros Organizations). The Fund has four main goals in Lithuania: (1) to increase understanding of NGOs through public events and work with the media, (2) to reform laws to strengthen NGO operations, and educate NGOs concerning legal issues, (3) to develop NGO capacity via institution building grants, networking, and training regarding management, strategic planning, public relations, advocacy, member services, financial accounting, etc. and (4) to enhance NGO sustainability and promote philanthropy, via information sharing and joint projects involving NGOs and local government.

■ U.S. Ambassador Keith C. Smith introduces the Baltic American Partnership Fund to the NGO community

■ Women acquire skills for new work at the Women's Employment and Information Center, under the Democracy Network program

■ Open Hearing in the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, December 1998

